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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000099

SIPDIS

DRL FOR A/S POSNER
NEA FOR CONNELLY/WITTES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/19/2030

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM KIRF EG

SUBJECT: ACTIVISTS, BLOGGERS DETAINED WHILE ATTEMPTING TO
VISIT NAGA HAMADI

REF: A. CAIRO 59
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Classified By: Economic-Political Minister-Counselor
Donald A. Blome for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. KEY POINTS

-- (SBU) The GOE arrested and detained a group of about 30 activists and bloggers the morning of January 15 as they arrived in Naga Hamadi to visit the families of those killed in the January 6 sectarian shootings (ref A).

-- (SBU) The group of detainees included activists from secular opposition political parties and movements, bloggers and journalists. One member told us the group also planned to speak to Coptic families about sectarian tensions in Naga Hamadi.

-- (SBU) The government released the detainees during the mid-afternoon of January 16. Lawyers confirmed there are three criminal code charges (not under the Emergency Law) related to illegal assembly pending against the group, but did not expect the government to take further action on the case.

-- (C) The Ambassador, DCM and ECPO Minister-Counselor raised concern over the case with senior GOE officials, and urged the GOE to release the detainees.

12. (C) On the morning of January 15, police arrested a group of approximately 30 activists, bloggers and journalists at the Naga Hamadi train station in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Qena as they disembarked from their train en route to the town of Naga Hamadi. According to one detainee, blogger Wael Abbas who met with A/S Posner in Cairo January 14, the group planned to pay condolence calls on the families of those killed during the January 6 sectarian shootings in Naga Hamadi (ref A), and speak to Copts about sectarian tensions in the area. Abbas said police beat and lightly injured blogger Ahmed Bedawi during the arrests "for no apparent reason."

13. (C) Contacts told us that following the arrests, police detained the male members of the group in a nearby facility, and held the female members in an area hospital. Contacts understood that secular opposition politician Osama El-Ghazali Harb, who was in Naga Hamadi at the time on a separate visit to the victims' families, was concerned that police would abuse the women, and therefore convinced authorities to hold the female members in a hospital. Harb told us separately that he was in Naga Hamadi with members of his Democratic Front Party and leaders of the Kifaya movement, including George Ish'aq.

14. (SBU) The group included bloggers, journalists, activists

from secular opposition parties such as El-Ghad and the Democratic Front Party and movements such as "Kifaya" and "April 6. A lawyer for the group confirmed that a French activist was among the detainees. Some of the detainees are participants in Freedom House's "New Generation" program which provides training for young activists. One member of the group departed for Washington January 18 to participate in a Project on Middle East Democracy program. Contacts confirmed that activist and El-Ghad party member Israa Abdel Fattah was also part of the group. (Note: Abdel Fattah was the subject of headlines in April 2008 when she was arrested and detained for 17 days after her call for an April 6 general strike on Facebook attracted almost 70,000 members (ref B). Following her release, she renounced her activities in a television interview, and has remained out of public view until now. End note.)

¶15. (C) The government released the detainees mid-afternoon on January 16. Contacts told us the release was contingent on the activists' agreement to depart Upper Egypt immediately for Cairo on private rented buses. Wael Abbas told us that police did not abuse him or the other male detainees in custody, but did not provide them with beds or blankets. Activist contacts close to the detainees told us they welcomed the Department's January 16 public statement of concern.

¶16. (C) Lawyers for the group confirmed to us that three penal code charges related to illegal assembly are currently pending against those arrested. The lawyers expected the government to keep the case open, ostensibly pending investigation, but that the public prosecutor would not order

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a trial.

¶17. (C) Beginning on January 15, we expressed concern over the detentions to senior GOE officials. Ambassador noted our concern to Presidential spokesman Soliman Awad, and DCM contacted MFA Senior Advisor and Spokesman Hossam Zaki. Economic-Political Minister-Counselor raised the issue with MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for Human Rights Wael Aboulmagd who defended the GOE decision to arrest the activists "to prevent further violence."

SCOBET